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**WOMEN AT WORK: *WORKING GIRL, DISCLOSURE* AND THE EVOLUTION
OF PROFESSIONAL FEMALE STEREOTYPES**

by

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Part I: Introduction

Working Girl (1988) and *Disclosure* (1994) were two of the most popular films of their respective decades and, on the surface, appeared to represent a new wave of feminist thinking in Hollywood. When *Working Girl* was released, many considered it to be a positive portrayal of working women and reflective of second-wave feminist gains. When *Disclosure* came out six years later, it prominently featured the smart and attractive female CEO of a highly profitable technology company and seemed to represent Hollywood taking the female executive character mainstream. A closer examination of both films, I argue, reveals that the seemingly progressive themes and characters were simply façades used to both mask and perpetuate longstanding gender norms. While *Working Girl* reflects the ideas of the second-wave feminist backlash movement by associating “women’s work [with] sexual display,”¹ *Disclosure* characterizes its female protagonist as a manipulative and sex-crazed femme fatale and affirms the existence of an inherent male nightmare in which women seize sexual, economic and corporate power. The way in which both films conceal sexist themes under a guise of feminism is just one example of how Hollywood uses representation to keep women, specifically working women, tied to a subordinate societal status.

While it is easy to look back on the blatantly sexist themes, characters and dialogue in films like *Working Girl* and *Disclosure* and dismiss them as laughably dated, a study of popular television over the past twenty years reveals that sexism toward professional women has evolved very little. Instead of reflecting the record numbers of women in the corporate world today, Hollywood has either entirely given up on

¹ Yvonne Tasker, *Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 1998) 6.

prominently featuring working women in film or simply come up with original ways to mask sexist themes and stereotypes. A close analysis of *Working Girl* and *Disclosure*'s blatantly sexist themes followed by a discussion of more subtly sexist postfeminist television characterizations reveals that professional female prejudice onscreen is still central to many mainstream media texts, just more cleverly camouflaged. It is only when audiences become aware of how little both times and representations have changed, I argue, that cinematic and televisual representation can begin to accurately reflect the life and struggles of the contemporary working woman.

Representation and The Maintenance of Hegemonic Ideals

In order to understand how film and television maintain female stereotypes, one must first understand how representation functions and informs the way in which individuals perceive reality. According to Stuart Hall's "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices," images are devoid of meaning or significance on their own.² When several images come together, however, they begin to "accumulate meanings, or play off their meanings against one another across a variety of texts and media."³ In the same way that children rely on the accumulation words and images to make sense of the world, film, television, and advertising give individuals the tools to both make sense of their own reality as well an alternative "otherness."

It is this concept of otherness that is particularly pertinent to any discussion of female representation and hegemonic maintenance onscreen. According to Christine Gledhill's essay "Genre and Gender, The Case of Soap Opera," "the norm of what counts as human [in western society] is provided by the masculine and only the women's culture

² Stuart Hall, "The Spectacle of the Other" (London: SAGE, 1997) 232.

³ Hall, 232.

needs to be marked as specifically gendered.”⁴ Male hegemony has consistently dominated western cultural values and one way this hegemony has been maintained is by designating a separate representational space for women that is distinct from the male norm. Women’s magazines, women’s television networks, women’s literature and women’s films, or “chick flicks,” are all explicitly gendered while “corresponding categories for men hardly exist”⁵ because the male point of view has become the standard to which everything is compared. The dominance and cultural valuation of a male point of view over a female one has meant that no matter how progressive female characters or “feminist films” may seem, they are still firmly grounded within female space that is defined by its difference to the male norm.

While the second-wave feminist movement presented an opportunity to free women from this distinctly female representational space, I argue that Hollywood has only used this opportunity to more solidly enforce gender distinctions instead of breaking them down. One possible reason for the enforcement of stereotypes, according to Bonnie Dow’s “Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture and the Women’s Movement since 1970,” is the fact that many Americans were and continue to be “ambivalent about feminism because it represents significant changes in traditional ways of thinking and acting.”⁶ As Hollywood executives, writers, producers, and directors have become more aware of a cultural ambivalence toward feminism, they have also become unlikely to “create programming that wholeheartedly endorses an idea that makes many people in

⁴ Christine Gledhill, “Genre and Gender: The Case of Soap Opera” (London: SAGE, 1997) 345.

⁵ Gledhill, 345

⁶ Bonnie J. Dow, Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement Since 1970 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1996) xxi.

their audience uncomfortable.”⁷ Dow asserts that representations of otherness are very powerful in “mobilizing fear and anxiety in the viewer,”⁸ and it is a deep feminist anxiety that I argue has compelled Hollywood to make gender distinctions and female subordination explicit via film, television and advertising.

Even though time times have changed and advertisers have been forced to, “acknowledge that women’s physical location is no longer restricted to the home,”⁹ the “qualities and responsibilities associated with ‘women’s place’ in the private sphere are still expected from women, both inside and outside media discourse.”¹⁰ It is easy to look around and see the millions of working women and believe that female workplace stereotyping is no longer a relevant issue. However, a viewing of even a couple of Hollywood films about working women shows that professional women are still, whether subtly or blatantly, tied to sexual or motherly hegemonic ideals that the mainstream media just cannot seem to shake. Instead of distancing itself from these ideals, I argue that Hollywood has kept them front and center but more creatively disguised as if to appear to have evolved. In order make sense of exactly how and why Hollywood has felt a need to enforce gender ideals and habitually incorporate themes of feminist backlash, one must first understand the central ideas of second-wave feminism.

Part II: Second-Wave Feminism, Backlash and *Working Girl*

De Beauvoir, Freidan and The Beginning of Second-Wave Feminism

⁷ Dow, xxi.

⁸ Dow, xxi.

⁹ Dow, xxi.

¹⁰ Dow, xxi.

The first major milestone for the second-wave feminist movement occurred with the release of Simone de Beauvoir's "The Second Sex"¹¹ in 1949, a book that discussed the same representational concepts of cultural norms and otherness that are still prevalent today. In her book, de Beauvoir argued that, "the self" can only make sense of itself by referencing what it is not. As women have historically and consistently been declared "other" by men who position themselves "subject," men have simultaneously situated women as the "object against which [he] must differentiate himself to attain subjectivity."¹² The assertion of men as subject and woman as other served as the frame for a new feminist period and de Beauvoir's ideas "allowed second-wave feminist writers to propose uncompromising cultural histories of female oppression, sexual inequality and gender exclusion."¹³

One of these feminist writers was Betty Friedan, the "mother of second-wave feminism," who drew heavily from de Beauvoir's thoughts in her own book, "The Feminine Mystique." In the "Feminine Mystique," Friedan asserts the need to break down society's patriarchal ideals and tries to "identify new spaces for female resistance and the articulation of an alternative, subjective female experience."¹⁴ Friedan argues that in post-war society, there was a divide between two kinds of female experiences: housewives or career women. This divide led Friedan to consider female representations in society and media and conclude that there is a "feminine mystique" that "socializes women into willingly accepting roles as wives and mothers without question."¹⁵ These

¹¹ Janet McCabe, *Feminist Film Studies: Writing the Woman Into Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2004) 3.

¹² McCabe, 4

¹³ McCabe, 6

¹⁴ McCabe, 6

¹⁵ McCabe, 5.

ideas from “The Second Sex” and “The Feminine Mystique” were just two of many voices that set the stage for a new conception of femininity onscreen and off. However, an analysis of popular television of the 1960s and 1970s illustrates that Hollywood was less than willing to embrace such alternative female experiences. Even though the second-wave feminist movement saw groundbreaking cultural and legislative gains for women and presented an opportunity for true representational change, what was ultimately revealed was the mainstream media’s deep-seated anxiety and inability to accurately represent the modern woman onscreen.

‘Sex and the Single Girl’ and The Age of the New Feminists

In 1966, *Newsweek* declared the “rise of new feminists,” a generation of “idealistic, ambitious white college graduates who sought careers before marriage.”¹⁶ As more and more single women fled the suburbs for the city, a record number of these women also pursued careers outside the home, either delayed marriage or initiated divorce, and reaped the benefits of a sexual revolution.¹⁷ These changes presented an opportunity for Hollywood to distance itself from previously traditional female characterizations and begin to incorporate more progressively feminist characters and attitudes onscreen. In its attempt to change, however, the media struggled with what many feminist film theorists deemed “the unrepresentability of the feminine.”¹⁸

While cultural attitudes about women had shifted away from the conventional during second-wave feminism, the majority of media texts exhibited a reluctance, as well as a simple confusion, about how to depict women as genuinely enjoying their single life,

¹⁶ Katherine J. Lehman, Those Girls: Single Women in Sixties and Seventies Popular Culture (Kansas, University of Kansas, 2011) 68.

¹⁷ Lehman, 2.

¹⁸ McCabe, 35.

big city independence, economic freedom and sex life without going too far. There was a deep-seated anxiety among the masses about where women belonged and an examination of the types of representations that were popular during this time can, I argue, provide a better sense of the cultural values and cultural phobias of the time period. The popularity of Helen Gurley Brown's *Sex and the Single Girl*, a text stating that "sexuality and work are not two distinct spheres but rather two sides of the same coin,"¹⁹ illustrated how the majority of Americans saw the working woman and, I assert, helped set the stage for the establishment of many contemporary workplace stereotypes in film and television.

In her book, Brown argues that female sexuality is tied to professional success and states that a combination of brains, talent and "a sexy attitude and the calculated application of femininity"²⁰ would get women to the top. Because many working men still believed women belonged at home, Brown urged women to bring their sexuality to the office so they could "compete with men without endangering their womanliness."²¹ Brown's ideas represented an "attempt to show women how to use the eroticized workplace to change their subordinate position"²² and this idea sold two million copies of *Sex* in three weeks²³ and was eventually made into an equally successful movie. While many saw Brown's thinking as positive and sexually revolutionary for women, I consider it to have been the start of new and ultimately negative direction for professional women. *Sex and the Single Girl* consistently portrays females in the workplace as "available and willing, whether through unabashed lust, hopeful romantic desire, or youthful naiveté:

¹⁹ Julie Berebitsky, *Sex and the Office: A History of Gender, Power, and Desire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012) 177.

²⁰ Berebitsky, 188.

²¹ Berebitsky, 194.

²² Berebitsky, 188.

²³ Jen Doll, "Sex and the Single Girl: The Legacy of Helen Gurley Brown."

male attention was never truly or completely unwanted.”²⁴ There is a steadfast reliance throughout the book on what men have to give, “whether it be a ring, a raise or even validation.”²⁵ Brown makes use of sexist representational patterns that have existed throughout history but reinvents them by situating them within the context of the office, a move I argue was profoundly dangerous for future generations of working women and their depiction onscreen.

Gurley-Brown’s argument that a woman cannot succeed without using her sexuality as bait for men is not only sexist but also represents an active reversal of the progressive feminist thinking of the time. When second-wave feminist writers and activists were trying to break down gender-biased representational patterns, Gurley-Brown was simply reinforcing these patterns and the incredible popularity of *Sex and the Single Girl*, both the book and the movie, showed that cultural values were more aligned with the ideas of Gurley-Brown than with true feminist change. The sale of millions of books meant the spread of “professional woman as sex object” stereotypes, an invitation for the masses to construct the workplace as a sexual space and the beginnings of feminist backlash.

One positive consequence of *Sex and the Single Girl* was that it forced Hollywood to realize that there was no longer a one-size-fits-all mold of womanhood to depend on. According to “Those Girls: Single Women on Screen in 60s and 70s Pop Culture,” the single woman onscreen in the 1960s served several functions but was primarily used to help “viewers negotiate sweeping changes in gender roles and sexual

²⁴ Berebitsky, 185.

²⁵ Berebitsky, 187.

mores”²⁶ while also posing “a direct affront to the sexual double standard and defied the dominant trend toward early marriage in the 1960s.”²⁷ While popular television shows alluded to an increasing female professional and sexual independence, this “independence, sexuality and career ambition [also] posed a potential threat to viewers” so it “had to be carefully managed through characterization, plot devices and strategic endings.”²⁸ Hollywood exhibited a clear fear of women pursuing feminism too intensely lest she lose her inherent womanliness and continuously worked to tame “the single woman’s sexuality and strength to meet industry standards and appeal to diverse audiences.”²⁹ This “taming” and “careful management” of female independence onscreen still underlies many mainstream films about working women today. In the 1960s, there was a clear desperation to ground television and film squarely between modern and traditional without even the slightest move toward either side. While this designation might not be as obvious today, there is still, I argue, a clear unwillingness to position the independent professional women as the new normal and this unwillingness has played a significant role in the establishment and incorporation of feminist backlash onscreen.

Feminist ‘Backlash’ On and Off Screen

The feminist backlash movement entered public consciousness a result of Susan Faludi’s 1991 book *Backlash*, which traces the historical pattern of feminist progress, examines the subsequent backlash that eventually always results, and analyzes the manifestation of cultural feminist anxieties in popular culture. Faludi asserts that while many Americans shifted toward a more liberal and feminist way of thinking in the 1960s,

²⁶ Lehman, 2.

²⁷ Lehman, 2.

²⁸ Lehman, 1.

²⁹ Lehman, 2.

this way of thinking was never fully part of mainstream consciousness and, therefore, resulted in a move back toward a more conservative and decidedly negative view of women, particularly single working women. For example, between the late 1970s and mid 1980s, print media began adopting a more alarmist tone when reporting on issues primarily affecting women. There were panicked reports of a “man shortage” as well as “scientific research” about women’s decreasing fertility rates. Single women were reportedly more depressed than ever and professional women were experiencing a “burnout” that produced serious physical and mental ailments. One 1986 *Los Angeles Times* article quoted psychologist Annette Baran as saying “the rising mental distress of single women is a phenomenon of this era” and “being single too long is traumatic.”³⁰ According to Faludi, the ostracism of women in the media symbolized an emerging backlash against feminist progress, a backlash that should not have come as a surprise as these movements have historically worked in a cyclical fashion, “[returning] every time women begin to make some headway toward equality.”³¹

Even though the 1960s saw significant legislative and cultural gains for women, these gains can be seen unraveling upon consideration of polls that were administered to men in the 1980s regarding women’s role in society. Faludi describes studies that found men were less likely than women “to support equal roles in business and government” and preferred their family to be more traditional, with men being the breadwinners.³² The return of this traditional family-oriented mindset for men occurred in tandem with what Faludi calls a “crisis in masculinity,” or an anxiety experienced by men as women began

³⁰ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Crown, 1991) 36.

³¹ Faludi, 46.

³² Faludi, 61.

to leave the home and pursue their own economic independence in greater numbers.³³

Because the 1980s conception of masculinity was so economically based, women in the workplace represented a threat that men saw the need to defend themselves and their masculine identity against. This “need to defend” is another feature that, I argue, significantly influences demeaning representational patterns of executive women and perpetuates the notion that women are somehow trying to seize male masculinity.

Upon close consideration of many popular books, films, television shows or news segments made during this period of the 1980s, one can notice this male fear, a subtle reversal of feminist thinking and how dismal, as well as simply rare, the depiction of strong professional women in popular culture had become. While, according to Faludi, Hollywood once “had a brief infatuation with the feminist cause”³⁴ in the 1970s, the 1980s ushered in a period where “droves of passive and weary female characters began filling the screen.”³⁵ Even though many female film characters from the 1970s “struggled toward active engagement in affairs beyond the domestic circle” and “raised their voices not simply for personal improvement but for humanitarian and political causes,” the women in 80s films established a clear distance from these outwardly feminist characters of the preceding decade. There was a more traditional woman pushed to the media forefront, one that Faludi argues represented Hollywood “taking the feminist films and running the reels backward.”³⁶ Instead of reflecting the number of women who were pursuing professional careers outside the home, Hollywood films were more

³³ Faludi, 65.

³⁴ Faludi, 123.

³⁵ Faludi, 126.

³⁶ Faludi, 126.

representative of women fleeing the office and “hammering at the homestead door.”³⁷

When women on screen *were* shown having jobs outside the home, there was, according to Faludi, always a clear emphasis on the lack of pleasure and meaning stemming from these jobs. The implication that goes along with these portrayals of working women’s misery is that “women had a better deal when they stayed home” and that it is “easier to rationalize a return to housekeeping when the job left behind is so lacking in rewards or meaning.”³⁸

The shift in cinematic representation from asserting women as proud professionals to stressing an innate female craving for a husband and children incorporated many feminist backlash themes. The most popular films featuring working women during the late 1970s to late 1980s included *9-5*, *Working Girl* and *Baby Boom* and these films all cast the female protagonists as unhappy with their job, either as result of sexual harassment, lack of rewards, and/or lack of personal life because of professional ambitions. The emphasis on the unhappiness the women in these films experience as a result of their jobs once again illustrated Hollywood’s preoccupation with the idea that women belong in the home and should keep the goal of traditional family at the forefront of their thoughts. While the seeds of this idea can be seen in films throughout history, the popularity of films like *Working Girl* and *Disclosure*, which grossed \$64,000³⁹ and \$83,000⁴⁰ respectively, proved that audiences were responding to feminist backlash and painting a deeply problematic picture for future depictions of working women.

³⁷ Faludi, 126.

³⁸ Faludi, 126.

³⁹ "Working Girl," IMDB.

⁴⁰ "Disclosure," IMDB.

The new crop of 80s films about women in the corporate world is also a perfect example of how Hollywood used elements of feminism to mask deeper misogynistic themes. In Lilian Barger's essay "Backlash: From Nine to Five to The Devil Wears Prada," she states that many films made in the 1970s and 1980s "illustrate an anti-feminist backlash cloaked in a superficial gloss of female empowerment."⁴¹ While films like *Working Girl* showed women experiencing corporate life and pursuing their professional goals, the emphasis usually shifted to figuring out what women "really want." While any viewer knows that different women will answer this question differently, Hollywood has spent years ending films about working women with the female protagonist realizing that what she wanted was a life of domestic bliss with the male protagonist. As more and more films have positioned this ending as the answer to the question of what women really want, the audience has, I argue, been trained to believe that this is what all women are really after, no matter how much education or professional opportunity they have. Women, as far as Hollywood is concerned, have an "innate" desire to settle down that is more important than professional success and a job is only a temporary pursuit of happiness until a serious romantic prospect is presented.

Working Girl and *Disclosure* are two films that use these themes and devices of feminist backlash to keep women tied to a subordinate societal status. In order to notice exactly how this backlash functions and how it continues to be prevalent today, one must first strip away the faux feminist veil of both films.

What's in a Name?

⁴¹ Lilian C. Barger, "Backlash: From Nine to Five to The Devil Wears Prada," (Women's Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal, 2011) 336.

The first way in which *Working Girl* exemplifies a spirit of feminist backlash is simply by its title “Working Girl,” a term with deep historical ties to female prostitution. According to Yvonne Tasker’s “Working Girls: Gender and Sexuality in Popular Cinema,” the term “working girl” has never fully evolved independently of its sexual implications and has instead resulted in a strange double meaning invoking both innocence and sexuality. Tasker states that while women and work had at one time functioned as mutually exclusive ideas, the introduction of the term “working girl” joined women and work in “some awkward union”⁴² of sexuality and innocence. In media representations today, “working girl” has often come to operate in both “its innocent literal sense and in its acquired sense that women who worked outside the home were morally suspect”⁴³ and it is this “suggestive elision,” as Tasker refers to it, that has, I believe, been consistently attached to representations of working women in Hollywood films. By using a title with such historical implications, *Working Girl* automatically situates the two female protagonists within a sexualized framework, ties this eroticism to the physical office space and sets the film up as a feminist backlash text before it even begins.

Working Girl’s title works much in the same way that *Sex and the Single Girl* kept professional women tied to an “inherent” eroticism. Later in her text, Tasker argues that Hollywood’s “representation of working women almost inevitably involves an invocation of sexuality and sexual performance.”⁴⁴ Twenty-six years after *Sex* was published, viewers were still being given the same sexualized stereotypes of professional

⁴² Tasker, 6.

⁴³ Tasker, 6.

⁴⁴ Tasker, 6.

women. When women are continuously sexualized in their pursuit of work and economic independence by mainstream media outlets, I argue that audiences become naturally inclined to internalize these constructions as truth. Even though *Working Girl* focuses on two executive women and could, therefore, be seen as a progressive feminist film, I see the film's titling as an active attempt to keep women in constant connection with their sexuality and stuck within a distinctly female representational space.

Female Sex Objects and Male Sex Gods

Working Girl's suggestive positioning of the female protagonists extends well beyond the film's title and is continuously emphasized throughout the film. On paper, *Working Girl* reads as significantly and positively influenced by the preceding feminist movement. Tess McGill (Melanie Griffith) is a Staten Island secretary working for Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver), a senior Wall Street investment executive. The film stars two women, one of whom begins in a position of significant economic and corporate power and another eventually achieving a similar status, yet these seemingly feminist characterizations are quickly overshadowed by catty and erotic undertones. Shortly after Tess begins working for Katherine, she approaches Katherine with an idea to initiate a merger between compatible companies. Katherine initially shoots down the idea but when she is forced to take a leave of absence after an injury, Tess uncovers that her boss had begun implementing the merger idea as her own.

In her quest to prove the idea was rightfully hers, Tess not only physically morphs into a Katherine look-a-like, wearing Katherine's clothes and shedding all physical signs of her working class background and accent, but also falls in love with Katherine's boyfriend, Jack Trainer, as he helps Tess execute her plan. When Katherine heals and

returns to work, she finds out that Tess has fallen in love with Jack, has successfully pursued the merger and taken over as boss. By the end, Katherine is revealed as having tried to steal Tess's idea while Tess prevails and secures her own position as an investment executive and lives happily ever after with Jack. Unlike the feminist backlash films described by Susan Faludi and Lillian Barger, films in which women were fleeing the workplace in search of domestic bliss en masse, Tess and Katherine appear independent, take pride in their success and appear perfectly capable and satisfied without children or a husband. However, upon closer consideration, neither Katherine nor Tess's professional success is ever fully independent of the men in their lives or their sexuality, continuing the trend of successful professional women always being somehow be defined by their sex.

There are several specific scenes throughout the film that assert Tess's femininity as she fights to be taken seriously by her male peers and chases her professional ambitions. For example, when Tess decides to pursue her idea for a likely corporate merger, she arranges to meet Jack Trainer, a mergers and acquisitions executive, at a cocktail party to discuss how he thinks she should proceed. In the scene, Tess sits the bar awaiting Jack's arrival, unaware of what he looks like. When Jack arrives and sees Tess, he approaches her and sits down, also not knowing she is the woman he had planned to meet. Immediately, he avoids identifying himself and begins flirting with Tess, saying "I saw you and told myself I'd get to know you" and "you're the first woman I've seen at one of these things that dresses like a woman, not like how a man would dress if he was a woman."⁴⁵ When Tess says she's waiting for Jack Trainer, instead of admitting that he is

⁴⁵ *Working Girl*, Dir. Mike Nichols, Twentieth Century Fox, 1988.

the man she's looking for, Jack tells her that "Jack Trainer" just left. Tess attempts to leave too but Jack persuades her to stay and take tequila shots with him. He says "I'm sure you're an ace at whatever you do but how you look..." and Tess responds with the now infamous line, "I have a head for business and a bod for sin." Jack continues to steer clear of any and all business talk in an attempt to woo Tess, who subsequently gets drunk, carried home, undressed and tucked into bed by Jack. What is disturbing about this scene is that Jack knows who Tess is and what she wants but instead of sticking to business and showing interest in her ideas, Jack sees and treats Tess as a sex object. While Jack does not go as far as sexually taking advantage of Tess in her drunken state, he still undresses her and sleeps overnight in her bed. When Tess wakes up and realizes she's half naked and Jack is in her bed, she sneaks out clearly horrified, having no recollection of what happened.

While Jack casts Tess as the object of his sexual desire, a subsequent scene shows just how easily other female characters in the film will willingly and blatantly eroticize themselves. When Jack comes to see Tess at her office the day after their drunken rendezvous, Tess's friend Cyn pretends to be her assistant and asks Jack "Can I get you anything Mr. Trainer? Coffee? Tea? Me?" While this line is clearly meant in a comical way, it also works to reaffirm the idea that the office is an erotic space in which women need to assert their femininity in order to get ahead or get noticed by the men in charge. This complete abandonment of professionalism upon the entrée of an attractive, single man plays out exactly as Helen Gurley Brown described in her book so many years before and shows exactly how little the office had changed since the early sixties.

As the film continues, there are countless other instances of professional female sexualization: When Tess and Jack meet after their drunken rendezvous and Tess asks Jack why he didn't identify himself the previous night at the bar, he says "because I knew what would happen. It would have been all mergers and acquisitions, no lust and tequila." At the end of the film when Jack is telling his boss that Tess is the one they need to make the deal happen he says to his boss "I'm telling you sir. She's your man." Once the intended humor of these scenes wears off, the viewer is left with the reality that women are either only superficially taken seriously or they are taken seriously in terms of a masculine vernacular ("she's your man"). Yvonne Tasker argues in "Working Girls," that to be "a 'working girl,' means understanding economics in sexual as well as business terms."⁴⁶ *Working Girl* actively sustains the same decades-old idea that moving up the corporate ranks requires both a keen business savvy as well as an outward expression of femininity.

The film's juxtaposition of Tess's romantic life with her work life also works to reinforce themes of feminist backlash, specifically that romantic unhappiness is directly correlated with professional unhappiness. At the beginning of the film, there is a consistent focus on Tess's "dissatisfaction with the perception of her as a sexualized object at work and at home."⁴⁷ She is miserable working for a man who doesn't take her seriously and she is dating a man who is cheating on her. Once Tess starts working for Katherine, begins implementing her own ideas, moves up the ranks and starts falling for Jack Trainer, the film establishes a "parallel between the romance plot and the narrative

⁴⁶ Tasker, 40.

⁴⁷ Tasker, 41.

of achievement at work” and this parallel works to “underline the extent to which status is inextricably bound up in some way with sexual performance.”⁴⁸

The fact that Tess’s romance with Jack begins at almost the exact same time that Tess begins to blossom professionally indicates what is clearly a still-persistent reticence for Hollywood to acknowledge women as economically and sexually independent. This impulse for the film’s creators to intertwine a professional storyline with a romantic plot proves that Hollywood was still not completely invested in feminist advancements and still believed women could not be truly fulfilled by their job alone. While *Working Girl* could have easily focused on Tess’s ascent to corporate glory, there is an implication that a woman-in-business plot would not have been entertaining or realistic enough to carry a film on its own, so a romantic plot had to be supplemented and positioned as equally important. Even though Tess and Katherine are not seen fleeing the office in pursuit of marriage and children like so many female film protagonists of the 1980s, their constant positioning in relation to Jack Trainer indicates that professional women onscreen and off were still being defined by the men in their lives. Tess and Katherine are two smart and driven women yet their romantic tie to Jack is constantly asserted as equally, if not more, important than their successes at work.

The reliance on what men have to give can be seen from the beginning of the film, particularly in one scene when Katherine is preparing for her ski holiday. The viewer sees Katherine in her large office, speaking on the phone in German and then telling Tess how excited she is for her luxe upcoming trip with Jack. It is implied that Katherine is not only well educated (based on her proficiency in German), but also very

⁴⁸ Tasker, 41.

good at what she does, based on the size of her office as well as her ability to pay for such a vacation. However, the tone of the scene changes significantly when Katherine expresses hope that it is the weekend Jack will propose. She says, "I think he's going to pop the question. I've indicated that I'm receptive to an offer, I've cleared the month of June and I am, after all, me." When Tess asks, "What if he doesn't pop the question," Katherine responds with, "I really don't think that's a variable. Tess you don't get anywhere in this world by waiting for what you want to come to you. You make it happen." The way in which Katherine uses such a business-oriented vernacular to describe the hopes she has for her romantic life is not only strange but, I believe, diminishes her independence and success as a woman. Katherine clearly has the knowledge, the money, and the power yet her militant pursuit of being Mrs. Jack Trainer only supports the archaic notion that women will not "have it all" until they have a ring.

When Katherine returns from her skiing accident at the end of the film, unengaged and unaware that Jack has taken up with Tess in her absence, she invites him to her house. When Jack arrives, Katherine is in bed in a negligee and she says, "these past few weeks I've heard this funny little sound deep inside. Tick tock, tick tock. My biological clock. And I've been thinking. Let's merge. You and I. Mr. and Mrs. Fabulously Happy." As she's saying this, she is unzipping Jack's pants and asks, "Can big jack come out to play? Little Katie's been so lonely." Once again, there is obviously a comedic tone to this dialogue but Katherine's focus on the "ticking" of her biological clock implies that her professional life, while successful, has proved unrewarding and what will make her life complete is marriage and children.

According to Elaine Berland and Marilyn Wechter's "Fatal/Fetal Attraction: Psychological Aspects of Imagining Female Identity in Contemporary Film," many films released in the late eighties capitalized "on the anxieties of women of the baby boom generation who [were] trying to balance competing claims of self, career, family and the biological clock."⁴⁹ As women on screen and off experienced a "need to balance competing claims for autonomy and connectedness, marriage and independence, career and motherhood and sex object and sex agent," they subsequently experienced "powerful conflicts."⁵⁰ When women are shown onscreen as the happy stay at home mother, they "function to reduce anxiety and to preserve the incest taboo, the stability of the home and the status quo." By doing this, the stay at home mother and wife "exemplifies the narrow range of acceptable behavior for women and the polarization of female sexuality endorsed in society."⁵¹ While *Working Girl*'s focus on two smart professional female protagonists clearly strays from this classic construction of womanhood on film, it still manages to awkwardly incorporate dated ideas of what women want to imply that work can easily distract women from their biological clock and therefore might not be worth their time.

Women v. Women

The film's dichotomy between Tess and Katherine is also problematic because it sustains the image of professional woman as catty and backstabbing. In William Palmer's "The Films of the Eighties," he states, "the social statement that [Tess and Katherine]'s characterizations push is that the way for women to succeed in the American workplace

⁴⁹ Elaine Berland and Marilyn Wechter, "Fatal/Fetal Attraction: Psychological Aspects of Imagining Female Identity in Contemporary Film" (The Journal of Popular Culture 26.3, 1992) 35.

⁵⁰ Berland and Wechter, 39.

⁵¹ Berland and Wechter, 37.

is, first, to become like men and, second, to betray other women.”⁵² At the beginning of the film, Katherine tells Tess, “I value your input. It’s a two way street. Watch me, Tess. Learn from me.” She casts herself as a caring mentor who truly values Tess’s thoughts and professional ambitions and in one early scene, Tess proclaims to her (soon to be ex) boyfriend, Mick, “she takes me seriously! There’s none of that chasing around the desk crap. She wants to be my mentor.” However, this positive image female mentorship and camaraderie is quickly established as a fantasy when Tess finds out that Katherine was plotting to steal her idea.

According to Julia Hallam’s “Working Girl: A Women’s Film for the Eighties,” the film “represents the individualistic enterprise ethos in fictional form, presenting a comedy of power relations that places conflict between women at the center of the plot.”⁵³ While the conflict of power between Tess and Katherine does take center stage in the film and while this conflict could have played out in a calm and minimally confrontational manner, it instead manifested in typical Hollywood fashion and solidified the stereotype of corporate women as backstabbing and catty. When Katherine returns home to find that Tess has pursued the idea that she had planned to execute on her own, she freaks out and screams “that little slut! That damn bitch secretary!”

I argue that the film’s need to characterize the female protagonist as dishonest and backstabbing further villainizes executive women and legitimizes gender norms. There is already a rampant societal stereotype that women are cattier and more manipulative than their male counterparts. The way in which the film affirms this idea and situates the

⁵² William J. Palmer, The Films of the Eighties: A Social History (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993) 271.

⁵³ Julia Hallam, “Working Girl: A Woman's Film for the Eighties” (Gendering the Reader: 1994) 193.

female conflict within an office is another unique way that Hollywood writers combine traditional sexism with feminist gains and incorporate a feminist backlash agenda into mainstream film. At the end of the film, only one woman wins. The decision to end the film this way tells audiences that there is only room for one woman at the top of the corporate ladder and it takes a dedicated level of bitchiness and deceit to get there.

Class Conflict and Transformation

The final problematic piece of the *Working Girl* puzzle is the way in which the film deals with class and economic status, specifically its implication that only one type of woman (white and well-educated) is capable of achieving executive-level success in the corporate world. While many scenes in the film oppose Katherine and Tess in their romantic pursuit of Jack, the film also opposes the two women in terms of their social status, emphasizing Katherine as the well-heeled Wellesley alum and Tess as the working class night school-educated secretary. The most obvious way in which the film makes a class distinction between the women is by comparing their physical appearances. In the first scene, Tess is on the Staten Island Ferry on her way to work and even though she is dressed professionally, her big hair, sneakers, big gold jewelry and thick Staten Island accent stress the fact that she is not in a position of corporate power. When Katherine first enters the office, by comparison, she is wearing pearls, high heels, carrying a leather briefcase and a newspaper under her arm. She is the image of class and refinement as well as professional power. After contrasting the women physically, the film juxtaposes Katherine and Tess's living environments. Katherine lives in a multi-story Manhattan townhouse, complete with chandelier, exercise equipment and walk-in closet, while Tess lives in a modest apartment outside of Manhattan, both geographically and

metaphorically. The gap that exists between Katherine and Tess on the corporate totem pole is so extremely polarized and I argue that this vast differentiation functions to stress that women who look, talk and act like Tess will always automatically be at a professional disadvantage. While many could read Tess's ascent to professional glory as a hopeful tale that anyone can achieve the same kind of success as Katherine, the way in which Tess transforms herself in order to pursue her goals involves such a complete physical metamorphoses that it affirms the idea that money talks.

Tess begins her transformation after Katherine is injured and has to stay in Germany. Tess originally visits Katherine's house to pick up mail and run errands but over the course of the film, Tess moves in, starts wearing Katherine's designer clothes (one dress in particular is stated to cost six thousand dollars), and cuts her hair into a short style, saying, "if you want to be taken seriously, you need serious hair." This equation of "serious" with a monied style of living associates class and professional success in a problematic way. As Tess sheds all physical signs of her Staten Island roots and leaves the island to live in Katherine's townhouse while Katherine recovers, she steadily moves up the corporate ladder and bolsters the stereotype that the only way to be a boss is to morph into a Katherine-type of woman. In Julia Hallam's essay "Working Girl," she notes that "the seediness of Tess's Staten Island neighborhood environment and the luxurious lure of Katherine's Manhattan apartment are constantly juxtaposed in the film"⁵⁴ and this comparison sets up "the equation that equates a 'feminine ideal' of beauty and success with material goods and the status of owning them."⁵⁵ When Tess is seen wearing Katherine's designer clothes or an expensive briefcase that she receives

⁵⁴ Hallam, 191.

⁵⁵ Hallam, 191.

from Jack, she is cast in a powerful and professional light. Hallam continues by saying, “Tess succeeds in her ambitions because she changes her image, she adopts Katherine’s style. In consuming the film, female viewers also consume the image of Tess becoming like Katherine.”⁵⁶

The film’s affirmation that only white, well-educated women can succeed at work is, I argue, dangerous because it tells women of color and of other socio-economic classes that their professional aspirations are not highly valued or considered plausible by Hollywood or western culture. While a discussion of feminist backlash representation and race is a topic unto itself, it is still important to acknowledge how consistently Hollywood ignores diverse female perspectives, especially in films about working women, in order to notice and make sense of the multitude of female representational weak spots.

Part III: 90s Gender Roles, Male Fears and *Disclosure*

One could argue that while *Working Girl* contains elements of feminist backlash, it is not a sexist film because Tess ends up professionally and romantically fulfilled while also winning the respect of her peers. Let us turn our attention, then, to *Disclosure*, a film, among others made in the 1990s like *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction*, that reverses gender norms to prove their legitimacy and casts professional women as sex-crazed femme fatales who are ultimately stripped of all professional and psychological credibility.

The Punishment of the Femme Fatale

In the same way *Working Girl* put its female protagonists at an automatic disadvantage simply through its title, *Disclosure* uses techniques of genre, specifically

⁵⁶ Hallam, 191.

conventions of film noir, to construct its female lead as a manipulative and sexualized villain before she even says a word. Meredith Johnson is a beautiful, smart, successful executive who enters a senior corporate position as a result of Digicom's merger. Rather than being celebrated for this accomplishment, however, Meredith is immediately portrayed as the sexually aggressive femme fatale to show audiences what can happen when a sexually independent woman assumes a position of corporate power.

Traditionally, the character of the femme fatale has primarily acted in two ways: to "recruit men for self-serving interests" and to "lure men into danger and destruction."⁵⁷ She is a stark departure from the dedicated stay-at-home wife and mother and often represents an alluring and mysterious pursuit for the male protagonist, as well as a danger that men would be wise to avoid. According to Tom Reichert and Charlene Melcher's, "Film Noir, Feminism, and the Femme Fatale: The Hyper-Sexed Reality of Basic Instinct," the character of femme fatale can usually be seen using her "eroticism and sexual attractiveness to pursue her sexual prey and achieve her goals" and it is the use of this personal sexuality that "frequently results in the male protagonist's loss of power and domination."⁵⁸ While *Disclosure* modernizes the femme fatale character, it does so in a fundamentally problematic way. The decision to situate Meredith, such an aggressively sexual character, in a corporate office, a space historically defined by intense gender politics and male/female power differentials, only bolsters the stereotype that women are unfit, be it too emotional, too catty, or too sexual, for business. Instead of representing a true modern businesswoman, Meredith embodies yet another backlash stereotype.

⁵⁷ Tom Reichert and Charlene Melcher, "Film Noir, Feminism, and the Femme Fatale: The Hyper-Sexed Reality of Basic Instinct," (Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 1999) 289.

⁵⁸ Reichert and Melcher, 290.

Meredith's construction as the manipulative femme fatale begins with a shoe.

When Meredith is first shown onscreen, her face is blurred so the only thing the viewer can see in focus is her sharp stiletto heel. The camera's immediate focus on such a "fetishistic symbol of dominance,"⁵⁹ purposely and permanently keeps Meredith connected to her sexuality, which is unleashed in full after she is rebuffed by the film's hero, Tom.

In this infamous scene, Meredith invites Tom, her ex-lover and new coworker, up to her office to share a bottle of wine. The scene begins innocently enough but things quickly turn inappropriate when Meredith starts to reference their past romantic relationship and gives Tom compliments like "you've kept in good shape, Tom...nice and hard." While Tom tries to keep things professional, Meredith begins unbuttoning Tom's shirt, to which he says, "Meredith, no, it's different now. You're my boss." Meredith continues on, saying, "Just lie back and let me take you. I could have anyone I want but I picked you. Now you've got all the power. You've got something I want. Just lie back and let me be the boss. Nobody has to know, it's just a meeting between colleagues." Meredith eventually wears Tom down and he violently switches from victim to aggressor, shoving Meredith up against the wall, ripping off her shirt and yelling, "You want to get fucked? Is that what you want?" Meredith then yells, "Yes, put it in NOW, you can't stop." However, while Tom is ripping off her underwear, he suddenly stops and says, "I have a family now...go take those champagne bottles and fuck them." Upon realizing she has been rejected, Meredith screams, "Get back here and finish what you started or you're fucking dead." It is Tom's rejection that unleashes the manipulative,

⁵⁹ Sarah Jane Finlay and Natalie Fenton, "If You've Got a Vagina and An Attitude, That's a Deadly Combination: Sex and Heterosexuality in *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence* and *Disclosure*" (2005) 54.

conniving and carnal beast that is the “real” Meredith. While the initial shot of Meredith’s shoe signaled the existence of Meredith’s sexuality, it was only subtly alluded to up until this point. Once she is rebuffed, however, Meredith spends the rest of the film becoming the “visual icon of danger”⁶⁰ that the femme fatale so often represents for the purposes of entertainment.

Meredith’s status as “visual icon of danger” is clearly problematic. However, I argue that the way in which the film uses her character to make a larger point about the role of women, both inside and outside of the office, is even more troubling. When *Disclosure* was released, many argued that Meredith was a feminist character because she is successful, sexually independent, beautiful, smart and dynamic. While she is all of these things, she is also a sociopath. Meredith’s conflicting personality traits are indicative of the film’s deep ideological conflict, one in which blatant sexism is veiled “behind a quasi-feminist rhetoric.”⁶¹ According to Sarah Jane Finlay and Natalie Fenton’s “If You’ve Got a Vagina and An Attitude, That’s a Deadly Combination: Sex and Heterosexuality in *Basic Instinct*, *Body of Evidence* and *Disclosure*,” “a detailed examination of [Meredith’s] sexuality and [the film’s] sex scene reveals both its nod to feminism and its explicit misogyny...and an insidious theme of women-hating.”⁶²

This not-so-subtle pattern of the film’s women hating leads one to consider a cinematic dichotomy that we will see is still rampant today: the decision to blatantly sexualize working women or sexualize women under a guise of feminism. I argue that they are both damaging but the kind of misogyny featured in *Disclosure* and *Working*

⁶⁰ Reichert and Melcher, 288.

⁶¹ Finlay and Fenton, 54.

⁶² Finlay and Fenton, 53.

Girl is much more important to consider *because* it is not as obvious. The subtle sexism allows the film to completely rid itself of responsibility for the maintenance of destructive stereotypes, even though it continuously pushes ideas that women who are “dominant and aggressive in business will be sexually dominant and aggressive,” that women have “no qualms about sleeping their way to the top,” and that women are “willing to prostitute [themselves] for [their] company.”⁶³ To disguise these arguments under a veil of feminism is irresponsible because it leaves both men and women even more unclear about who the working woman is and what she wants as well as free to fall back on stereotypes that Hollywood has been pushing since the 1960s.

Meredith’s character is also another classic example of how women are unable to win in any scenario and are still punished no matter what path, domestic or corporate, they decide to take. The rise and fall of Meredith’s character is so much a result of her sexual independence that it shows how little we as a society have progressed with our thinking and actions since the feminist movement of the 1960s. According to Finlay and Fenton’s analysis, there are still only two scenarios for women in film. The first scenario usually involves a woman who “is successful in her career, personal and social life but for the maintenance of the heterosexual institution, she must eventually be punished for her hubris and brought to her proper place by means of sexual subjugation by a man.”⁶⁴ The second scenario “shows a more traditional stereotype of female sexuality as excessive and uncontrollable, which eventually leads to murder in order to secure the woman’s unbounded sexual freedom.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Finlay and Fenton, 55.

⁶⁴ Finlay and Fenton, 50.

⁶⁵ Finlay and Fenton, 50.

Disclosure combines both scenarios to make it clear that Meredith, as well as women in general, are inherently unsuited for senior roles outside the home. When Meredith is fired for her behavior at the end of the film, she says, “I am a sexually aggressive woman and I like it. Tom knew it and you can’t handle it. It is the same damn thing since the beginning of time. Veil it, hide it, lock it, throw away the key. We expect a woman to do a man’s job and make a man’s money and then walk around with a parasol and lie down for a man to fuck her like it was 100 years ago.” She explicitly states the sentiments that hundreds of mainstream media outlets have spent decades trying to cover up but by the time she does, she has already lost all professional and psychological credibility. Her voice is therefore discounted and her story only reinforces the glass ceiling instead of breaking it down. Audiences, both male and female, willingly or unwillingly, internalize characters like Meredith and are, I argue, more inclined to make corporate decisions based on these types of depictions. Until Hollywood decides to truly invest in feminist stories, characters and themes, the glass ceiling has no hope of being broken.

Loss of Masculinity and Male Fears in *Disclosure*

While Meredith’s character makes troubling and conflicting arguments about the suitability of women in business, Tom’s good guy character cautions men to carefully guard their masculinity against women in power. When the viewer first meets Tom, he is a happily married father of two with a successful career and an all around enviable life. He is a “family man, committed to his wife and children, playing out his appropriate role within the institutionalized heterosexuality.”⁶⁶ Once Meredith decides to punish him for

⁶⁶ Finlay and Fenton, 54.

rejecting her advances, however, she assumes the dominant male role and Tom becomes a helpless and emasculated example of what, as the film suggests, all men have a deep-rooted fear of becoming.

According to Susan Bordo's "Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.," Tom's character, as well as the film as a whole, "hit all the current raw male anxieties, both warranted and fantastical, from legitimate concerns about behavior being interpreted as harassment to nightmares of sexually castrating, scheming executives and rage at imagined injustices of affirmative action policies."⁶⁷ When women like Meredith, according to Bordo, "challenge implicit ownership, claim the right to share the power to define and control the rules of the game, sexual and otherwise, men [often] feel baffled and uncertain about the new rules. They may also feel threatened by a loss of manhood."⁶⁸ Tom's "implicit ownership" is first challenged when he loses an executive promotion to Meredith, a promotion he believed was rightfully his. Losing the job is difficult for him to deal with but the fact that he was passed over in favor of a woman makes him defensive, as well as simply angry.

Upon hearing the news, Tom explodes, "Meredith fucking Johnson, son of a bitch. This is a technical division, she doesn't know the difference between a software and a cashmere sweater." Tom eventually manages to control his anger and anxiety about losing the job and muster some, at least outward, support of Meredith. Her sexual attack, however, kick starts Tom's feminization as well as the swift realization of "inherent masculine anxieties." First, when Tom tries to tell his boss, Phil, what happened, he

⁶⁷ Susan Bordo, Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J. (Berkeley: University of California, 1997) 141.

⁶⁸ Bordo, 171.

learns that Meredith has filed a sexual harassment claim against *him*. Phil dismisses Tom's defenses, asking, "She jumped you? You're in denial. That's typical." When Tom yells, "She raped me!" Phil replies, "You need help Tom. You have to accept responsibility." Later, when Tom describes the situation to his lawyer, she says, "Meredith has the power, you don't." Even Tom's wife is skeptical after seeing how beautiful Meredith is and finding out that Meredith and Tom once dated. Tom steadily loses the things that are most important to him, his "sense of self, security, and achievement,"⁶⁹ to a powerful female figure.

Tom's feminization and loss of manhood, I argue, function to remind men of the need to constantly defend their masculinity, especially in light of feminist and gender equality measures in business. When women enter previously male-dominated arenas, like the office, men need to automatically defend themselves and keep women down to retain their status and male identity. A large part of Tom's panic about Meredith is because of a reversal of power and he therefore is left uncertain about how to play Meredith's game. When men make the rules, they control how the game, especially the corporate game, is played and there is no need to defend their male role. When women assume a powerful professional role, these rules change, and, as the film argues, leave masculine identity and stature extremely vulnerable. After steadily losing his family, credibility and masculine identity to Meredith, Tom realizes the only way to win these things back is by taking Meredith down. By taking Meredith down and unmasking her instability, Tom reclaims his masculinity as well as his power and respect. This message

⁶⁹ Finlay and Fenton, 55.

is just one more problematic idea *Disclosure* presents that, I argue, men and women internalize as a legitimate way for men to assert their stature and subjugate women.

Gender Reversal and The Double Role

Tom and Meredith's characters are so compelling for feminist scholars because they represent a reversal of gender norms. The reversal of traditional male and female identities, Meredith as the powerful boss and Tom as the feminized victim, work together to legitimize traditional gender roles, explain why they exist and show what can happen when men and women deviate from these roles. As our culture has become dominated by patriarchal attitudes, mainstream media has reflected an "admiration for the man-the-beast...in movies, ads, songs. Don't hold back. Be a man. Be a wild thing."⁷⁰ As a result, representational "rules" of masculinity and femininity have developed. According to Bordo, the rule for "representing men has been to show them in action, instrumental and effective, seemingly unconcerned about how they appear to others," while the rule for representing women is "to depict them only as objects of sight, existing for the pleasure of an imagined spectator, and aware that to be a spectacle is the domain of their value."⁷¹ Masculinity has come to be "associated with activity and [embodies] a subjectivity that is only concerned with getting the job done."⁷² Femininity, on the other hand, is "evaluated on the basis of appearance. Women are expected to be conscious of and concerned about how they look to others and a degree of vanity is acceptable, even desirable."⁷³ When a film like *Disclosure*, or similar films made in the 1990s like *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic*

⁷⁰ Bordo, 150.

⁷¹ Bordo, 151.

⁷² Bordo, 153.

⁷³ Bordo, 153

Instinct, come along, they, according to Bordo, “jangle powerful chords in the cultural psyche”⁷⁴ by manipulating these rules of representation.

Disclosure, *Basic Instinct* and *Fatal Attraction* are three films that had a hugely significant impact on the cultural psyche because of the way they reversed male and female gender roles to make a point about their legitimacy. The female protagonists are all beautiful and sexually independent working women in positions of corporate power, however, they are all also unabashedly sexual and this sexuality contributes greatly to their characterization as unstable and psychotic. The men in these films steadily lose their control to these women but ultimately win it back by taking these women down or simply killing them, and thus reclaiming a powerful masculinity identity that has allowed them to be victorious.

These stories also serve as warning to audiences to stay loyal to the social constructs of their gender or suffer the negative consequences. According to Bordo, “most of us live in social contexts that...offer significant social and material rewards (in jobs, sexual desirability, and the like) for those who successfully obey [existing conventions].”⁷⁵ Mainstream Hollywood films have, for decades, significantly contributed to the construction of these social contexts and provided audiences with examples of why it is worth their while to accept, assume and perpetuate gender norms, sexual norms, etc. They will experience both tangible and emotional rewards if they follow the rules that the media sets for them and their gender as well as avoid confusion regarding what Philip Green refers to as “double role confusion.”

⁷⁴ Bordo, 147.

⁷⁵ Bordo, 150.

According to Green's *Cracks in The Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood*, in the early 90s, Hollywood was focused "on trying to create 'women's movies' that men would also watch."⁷⁶ *Disclosure*, *Fatal Attraction* and *Basic Instinct* were just three of many films that blended romance and sex with thrilling mystery and action in an effort to appeal to universal female and male tastes, respectively. Audiences for these films were large, yes, but another effect of this genre blending was a dual conception of womanhood that resulted in a "deep source of [audience] confusion."⁷⁷ According to Green, "as the political fate of Hilary Rodham Clinton testifies" the female double standard that had already existed for years was "replaced (or deepened) by the double role." This double role often becomes "a source of resentment on the part of more traditional men and women."⁷⁸ This resentment can be seen through an analysis of Meredith's character but it is important to consider that her character did not exist in a vacuum. Her character represented this shift in Hollywood to manipulate gender, yet the double role that resulted only made audiences more defensive and thus, more likely to hold on to traditional conceptions of what gender should be.

Gender and Sexual Harassment

Disclosure's stance on sexual harassment is the final creative way in which the film blends gender roles in an effort to maintain their legitimacy. When Meredith sexually preys on Tom, she is crossing the boundaries of professionalism and clearly sexually harassing him. The film says that sexual harassment is not a uniquely female experience and that men can and do experience harassment by women, as evidenced by

⁷⁶ Philip Green, *Cracks in The Pedestal: Ideology and Gender in Hollywood* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1998) 176.

⁷⁷ Green, 176.

⁷⁸ Green, 176.

Meredith and Tom's story. Women, therefore, need not worry about being sexually harassed by men at work because men are just as susceptible to the advances of women. This point, however, is extremely ignorant of the dynamics of power and patriarchy that underlie most instances of sexual harassment.

If one goes back to the 1960s to consider Susan Gurley Brown's "Sex and the Single Girl," he or she can see that professional women have been historically groomed to be sexually objectified by the men they work with. Romantic interest at work, according to Brown, is flattering to women and women crave this romantic attention. Therefore, men are culturally taught to assume that women are flattered by any and all romantic attention. According to Bordo, "while popular culture strokes male paranoia about unwanted advances, it continues to look tolerantly, even admiringly at the man who won't take no for an answer."⁷⁹ While sexual harassment measures state that "no means no," no does not always mean no, especially when a woman says it to a man. When Tom's lawyer says to Meredith, "No means no. That's what we tell women. Do men deserve less?" Meredith asks her "Haven't you ever said no and meant yes Mrs. Alvarez?" Men are socially taught that when women say no, it represents a challenge to change this no to a yes.

In Craig Waldo, Jennifer Berdahl and Louise Fitzgerald's "Are Men Sexually Harassed?" they say that because "men have more social, organizational, and physical power than women, the power differential is logically smaller between a man and his perpetrator than between a woman and her perpetrator."⁸⁰ Thus, this power differential

⁷⁹ Bordo, 147.

⁸⁰ Craig R. Waldo, Jennifer L. Berdahl, and Louise F. Fitzgerald, "Are Men Sexually Harassed? If So, by Whom?" (1998) 60.

makes men significantly less likely to see their behavior as harassment and more likely to see it as “trivial, benign, or even welcome.”⁸¹ This idea that women will welcome sexual advances because they are flattered is an idea that feminists have been trying to debunk for decades and rather than helping to dismiss this idea, *Disclosure* only reinforces it. Yes, women and men are both subject to unwanted sexual advances and both capable of harassment. Bordo states that, “Women are not angels and men are not devils, and both are capable of abuse of power.”⁸² However, women and men do not have the same power or societal value and they are “still generally subject to different instructions on how to be in the world.” If this point was stressed to audiences rather than “can a woman really attack a man,”⁸³ they would have a better chance of truly understanding harassment as well as the reality that men and women are subject to different rules, especially at the office.

Part IV: Post-Feminism and Working Women

Working Girl and *Disclosure* are two films that used seemingly feminist premises and character devices to cover up deeper themes of feminist backlash and keep women tied to a distinctly female representational space. The post-feminist era of the 1990s and 2000s, by contrast, seemed to offer a promising solution for true female change with the creation of a new crop of television shows that centered on “the new woman, empowered and fantastic heroines, depictions of single career women, flawed yet authentic professionals struggling with family commitments and occupational demands, and

⁸¹ Waldo, Berdahl and Fitzgerald, 60.

⁸² Bordo, 155.

⁸³ Bordo, 155.

characters depicting a more traditional femininity.”⁸⁴ This “new woman” has been a staple of the most popular films and television shows of the past thirty years, such as *Bridget Jones*, *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*, and seemed to “indicate unprecedented possibilities for female characters and audiences”⁸⁵ after a long struggle to incorporate progressive feminist thinking into popular mass media.

A close look at these characters, however, as well the pillars of postfeminist thought, reveals that young women have been steadily turning their backs on feminism and returning to a more traditional mindset in which work is more of a temporary pursuit before finding a husband and having children. There has been an increasing cultural shift toward traditionalism and it is this shift, I argue, that has given writers, directors and producers an excuse to pack mass media with new interpretations of old stereotypes while also claiming to simply be representing the attitudes of the masses. I argue that the alignment of postfeminist cultural attitudes with the sexist ideas that Hollywood has pushed for decades has meant that writers have been able to rid themselves of responsibility while continuing to keep women tied down to a separate representational space in new and creative ways.

Postfeminism and The New Female Anxiety

There are many conflicting definitions of postfeminism. The conception I wish to focus on, however, is post-feminism as a continuation of feminist backlash in which young women increasingly dismiss feminism as dated, value femininity and youth, and

⁸⁴ Amanda D Lotz, Redesigning Women: Television After the Network Era (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2006) 3.

⁸⁵ Lotz, 3.

return to a more traditional mindset in which marriage and family are highly prioritized as the greatest source of happiness and fulfillment.

While one might assume that the young women of the 1990s and 2000s looked back positively on second-wave feminism and acknowledged it to be the reason for their wealth of opportunities and professional choices, a closer examination of film and television indicates that the opposite has occurred. As women, particularly young women, have achieved a more equal societal status and been exposed to a wealth of choices and opportunities during the postfeminist era, many began to distance themselves from feminism because it seemed like a dated and unnecessary concept. According to Angela McRobbie's "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and The New Gender Regime," the wide array of female choice in the 1990s and 2000s became "inextricably connected with the category of 'young women,'" while, "feminism [was] decisively 'aged' and made to seem redundant."⁸⁶ As the idea of bra-burning feminists fighting for equal opportunity began to seem both extreme and irrelevant to many young women, Hollywood jumped at the opportunity to transfer these ideas to the screen and use them "to make the case for women's disenchantment with the [feminist] movement."⁸⁷ Postfeminism was, therefore, a new opportunity for Hollywood writers to convince women to dismiss feminism and argue that the "new women" were turning their back on feminism because it was simply no longer necessary. The first way in which writers pushed this message was by crafting characters who were anxiety-ridden, lonely and

⁸⁶ Angela McRobbie, "Postfeminism and Popular Culture: Bridget Jones and The New Gender Regime," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 27.

⁸⁷ Dow, 209.

unhappy as a result of their wealth of opportunities and only found true fulfillment through romantic heterosexual love.

Postfeminist choice anxiety, according to McRobbie, is a stress that results from the sheer amount of possibilities that the postfeminist woman is able to pursue and this stress has led many women to find comfort in more traditional conceptions of femininity. According to McRobbie, young women today must, “choose the kind of life they want to live. Girls must have a life plan. They must become more reflective in regard to every aspect of their lives, from making the right choice in marriage to taking responsibility for their own working lives and not being dependent on a job for life or on the stable and reliable operations of a large-scale bureaucracy.”⁸⁸ The second-wave feminist struggle of not being able to pursue the same options as men has been so far removed from the experience of postfeminist young women that it is often difficult to relate to and easy to resent. I argue that Hollywood was quick to pick up on this resentment and use it onscreen to convince women that they had it better when they had fewer choices.

The character of Bridget Jones in the film *Bridget Jones's Diary* is one example of the postfeminist “everywoman” character struggling with choice anxiety. Bridget Jones is a thirty year-old woman living and working in London. She is, according to McRobbie, “a free agent, single and childless and able to enjoy herself in pubs, bars, and restaurants.”⁸⁹ She is “the product of modernity in that she has benefited from those institutions that have loosened the ties of tradition and community for women, making it possible for them to relocate to the city to earn an independent living without shame or

⁸⁸ McRobbie, 36.

⁸⁹ McRobbie, 36.

danger.”⁹⁰ Bridget has nothing but freedom and should therefore be the happiest and most fulfilled. However, the freedom that Bridget experiences is consistently stressed as a source of her unhappiness and makes audiences, especially female audiences, aware of “the stigma of remaining single, and the risks and uncertainties of not finding the right partner to be a father to children as well as a husband.”⁹¹ The film uses this postfeminist concept of choice anxiety to tell women what their priorities should be and the priorities that are asserted as important are disappointingly similar to those of the 1960s. While female characters in the 60s often turned to domesticity as their source of happiness, it was often because of a lack of opportunity elsewhere. However, Bridget is a character that craves domesticity to deal with too *much* opportunity. Bridget is, therefore, a perfect example of Hollywood continuing to argue the existence of a “natural” instinct to settle down and reproduce hidden beneath the charm of such a relatable and seemingly modern character. If one considers the character of Bridget within a postfeminist and feminist backlash framework, however, it becomes apparent that mainstream female representation has only been manipulated and modernized instead of truly progressing.

‘Work’ and Femininity

As Hollywood writers have used the idea of female choice anxiety to affirm “inherent” female desires, they have also drastically transformed mainstream media images of working women to be more outwardly feminine, youthful and sexual. According to Yvonne Tasker’s “Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture,” as male and female audiences have spent years watching films in which working women are “time-starved, over-worked, rushed, harassed, subject to their ‘biological clocks,’” they have

⁹⁰ McRobbie, 36.

⁹¹ McRobbie, 36.

come to think of “female adulthood defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis.”⁹² As a result, postfeminist representation has increasingly drawn strength from “the anxiety of aging at work” and become “acutely age conscious.”⁹³ The entrée of this age-consciousness has meant that the youthfulness, attractiveness and femininity of postfeminist “new women” characters has become centrally positioned, often above or equal to a successful career. *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* were two of the most popular “new woman” shows of the postfeminist era in which female beauty is a focus and work is often discussed but rarely seen.

On paper, *Ally McBeal* sounds like a truly modern and feminist representation. Ally is a successful, Harvard-educated lawyer at one of the top law firms in Boston and the show follows her attempts to balance her desire for a husband with her demanding career. However, one only has to watch a few episodes to notice an emphasis on the sexuality and femininity of its central female characters. First, all of the main female characters are slim and beautiful and get worryingly skinnier as the show progresses. Second, even though Ally works at what is described as a conservative law firm, she is almost always clad in a short skirt and heels. Ally’s skirt even became a cultural phenomenon on its own, leading one newspaper to ask, “When is a skirt not just a skirt? When Ally McBeal wears it.”⁹⁴ For many, especially feminists, Ally’s skirt represented “feminism running amok, bad fashion, unbridled sexuality and anorexia.”⁹⁵ Finally, the office environment on the show is saturated with sex and dating talk as well as sexual tension when Ally

⁹² Yvonne Tasker, "Feminist Politics and Postfeminist Culture," (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 10.

⁹³ Tasker, 11.

⁹⁴ Mary Corey, "'Hemlines Play Rising Role on 'McBeal' Television: Thigh-High Skirts on the Popular Fox Show Drive a Plot Twist That Lands the Title Character in Hot Water."

⁹⁵ Corey.

arrives at the law firm and finds herself working with her ex-lover and his new wife.

These features are only a select few examples of an “invasion of the workplace by the personal sphere [which] frequently drown[s] out any sense that any real work is going on at all,”⁹⁶ a common theme in postfeminist television.

An emphasis on femininity and female sexuality can be seen just as strongly, if not more so, in *Sex and the City*, a show that asserts its strong sexual focus in its title. On the show, all four of the main characters, Carrie (a writer), Samantha (a PR executive), Charlotte (an aspiring art gallery owner) and Miranda (a lawyer), are sexually independent working women who try to balance men, careers and friendships and represent the struggles of the “new woman” much in the same way Ally does. While all of the women have jobs and are seen going to work, there is very little that indicates that these jobs are of central importance or explains how someone like Carrie, a magazine sex columnist, could afford her Upper East Side apartment or the expensive designer duds she wears in every episode. Miranda is the only character who comes closest to experiencing the stress of the corporate world, regularly working eighty-hour weeks and having to fight for time off to spend with her husband and son. However, a broad consideration of the show and Miranda’s character reveals that after Miranda becomes a mother, there are noticeably fewer scenes depicting “working Miranda” and many more featuring “wife and mother Miranda.” Even though Miranda maintains that her job provides her with an identity outside the home, this attitude is voiced far more before she meets her husband and has a child.

According to Amanda Lotz in her book, “Redesigning Women: Television After

⁹⁶ Michael Skovmand, "The Culture of Post-Narcissism: Post-Teenage, Pre-Midlife Singles Culture in *Seinfeld*, *Ally McBeal*, and *Friends*," (Bristol: Intellect, 2008) 91.

the Network Era,” “Carrie’s career as a writer is an organizing narrative device; however, she never experiences ‘office politics’ or worries about her job in the way that a narrative emphasizing characters’ careers would likely explore.”⁹⁷ Lotz continues by saying that, “for comedic dramas and their new-woman characters, it is crucial that the characters have careers, but the actual depiction of them engaged in work is often minimal.”⁹⁸ While the career-as-narrative-device technique functions differently between Miranda, Carrie and Ally, any discerning viewer can notice that a female work identity is consistently less valued and celebrated than a female wife and mother identity and leads one to wonder how and why this has happened. I argue that this cultural valuation of the wife and mother “new woman” in mass media bolsters the sentiments that feminism is dead and no longer necessary and tells women that a career cannot fully satisfy them. It must be in the background, behind a fulfilling romantic life and it is this situation of work in the background of female thought that has allowed Hollywood writers to maintain feminist backlash in a postfeminist age.

The Re-Centralization of Marriage

The third defining feature of postfeminist television and sexist stereotype maintenance is the recentralization of marriage. According to Suzanne Leonard’s “‘I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here’: Adultery, Boredom and The ‘Working Girl’ in Twenty-First-Century American Cinema,” “heterosexual marriage remains the sine qua non of most women’s lives: relentlessly mythologized as both the greatest achievement and the producer of the greatest happiness.”⁹⁹ Even though women have more professional

⁹⁷ Lotz, 96.

⁹⁸ Lotz, 96.

⁹⁹ Suzanne Leonard, “‘I Hate My Job, I Hate Everybody Here’” (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007) 102.

opportunity than ever, mainstream media is often quick to distract women from these possibilities by positioning marriage as the greatest achievement women can accomplish, as evidenced by a “rise in multimedia productions that focus on the wedding ceremony as the site of the achievement of bourgeois aspirations.”¹⁰⁰ *The Bachelor*, *The Bachelorette* and *Say Yes to the Dress* are just three shows that have capitalized on postfeminist female anxieties and their popularity suggests, “that the nation is still captivated by the courtship narrative that leads to marriage.”¹⁰¹ These shows tell women what they should be prioritizing and what society values most while also reminding women that there are consequences should they prioritize differently than this cultural norm. According to Leonard, “‘entertaining’ shows about women’s marital aspirations are often fueled by an implicit pathologization of singlehood and are often offered in concert with more serious reminders of how time pressures are biologically enforced, specifically by declining fertility rates for women over the age of thirty.”¹⁰² Singlehood and childlessness have become postfeminist labels of failure and *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* are two examples that “effectively shame women into believing that if they do not marry and reproduce now it may soon be too late.”¹⁰³ The ways in which they do this, however, are subtle and representative of how cleverly Hollywood writers have been able to camouflage sexist sentiments in mainstream media.

In *Ally McBeal*, the viewer watches Ally spend a few years trying to juggle a job she loves with her quest to find Mr. Right only to leave her job in favor of motherhood. While Ally does not leave her job to get married, her decision to make a choice between

¹⁰⁰ Leonard, 102.

¹⁰¹ Leonard, 102.

¹⁰² Leonard, 102.

¹⁰³ Leonard, 102.

the two and choose motherhood over work is still grounded in a more traditional and stereotypical ideal of what women should value most. Indeed, Lotz wonders “whether the decision to connect Ally’s newfound maturity and confidence with her status as a mother simply repeats a common narrative device used to reaffirm that women only mature when they become mothers, or that devotion to a child becomes a substitute for romance.”¹⁰⁴ It is characters like Ally that tell career women that they will eventually have to make a choice between a fulfilling career and a family and implicitly push women away from the office and back into the home. In *Ally McBeal*, there is a suggestion that feminism “in the shape of a career and independence has not brought Ally the desired fulfillment, and she might be far happier if she had stayed on the natural path to motherhood and marital bliss.”¹⁰⁵ Even though Ally appears on the surface to be a modern independent woman who enjoys her career, she sacrifices her professional skills and education in favor of motherhood, thus becoming yet another example of what Hollywood wants women to be.

Sex and the City ends in a very similar fashion. Even though the show spends the majority of its six seasons emphasizing that marriage and children are not the path that every woman values or is inclined to pursue, each woman ends up happily coupled in a monogamous relationship with an implication of marriage or a long-term future. Even Samantha, a woman who values sex and career and considers married life with kids her own personal hell, ends up happily coupled. Even though Samantha was completely fulfilled with her job and her men for six seasons, the final episode couples her in such a traditional and unnatural way that it leads one to wonder why the writers felt the need to

¹⁰⁴ Lotz, 111.

¹⁰⁵ Stephanie Genz, "Singled Out: Postfeminism's 'New Woman' and the Dilemma of Having It All" (*Wiley Periodicals* 43.1, 2010) 110.

end such an unconventional show so conventionally. According to Leonard, “In post feminist popular media, these celebratory representations of marriage...emphasize that if push comes to shove a woman’s marital status is indeed more important than her career. Such portrayals frequently emphasize that female employment, far from being the sort of life necessity that feminists advocated, has the potential to be a hindrance to her feminine aspirations.”¹⁰⁶ While the show may have spent six seasons trying to position itself as a feminist show, the way it ended prompts one to wonder if the show was just extraordinarily skilled at utilizing a feminist veil to mask dated gender norms.

I argue that these three pillars of postfeminism, a dismissal of feminism, the centrality of beauty, and the assertion of a marriage-positive discourse, gave Hollywood executives and writers new sexist material to incorporate as well as creative ways to mask it. While the “new women” characters and conflicts were certainly subtler than *Working Girl* and *Disclosure* in their use of backlash, they are still grounded within a distinctly female and sexist framework and therefore, cannot be considered progressive or positive. Women are still sexualized no matter how smart, well educated or professionally capable and any kind of female sexualization onscreen, whether blatant or subtle, avoids confronting the core issue of why we as a culture feel the need to sexualize working women. A contrasting analysis between *Working Girl* and *Disclosure* versus *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City* shows that Hollywood has just found new ways to avoid acknowledging the core representational issues and this cannot and should not be considered progress.

¹⁰⁶ Leonard, 103.

What Now?

A study of sixty years of feminist backlash and stereotypes of working women can naturally leave one confused and dejected about the future of working women and their representation onscreen. However, I believe that female writers and female entertainment executives are the key to representational change. According to Christine Gledhill in Stuart Hall's book "Representation, "“being a woman’ will be experienced differently according to one’s age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.” In order to reflect the experiences of a multitude of women, Hollywood must realize the value of a diverse range of female voices. If women are given the chance to share their personal experiences juggling their different identities as wives, mothers, and working women, viewers can, I argue, begin to internalize the idea that working and having a satisfying home life are not conflicting experiences. The image of executive women as sexual beasts is clearly a male-driven fantasy that can easily be broken down when Hollywood puts the pen in a woman’s hand and gives her the chance to describe the reality that most women face on a daily basis. It needs to be made clear that women and men live their lives differently, make their choices differently and have unique points of view. When Hollywood realizes that perspectives are not mutually exclusive but could work together in an extremely positive and powerful way to break down contemporary representational boundaries, I believe women, especially working women, will begin to see true change onscreen and off.

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